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**REMARKS
BY
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BANGLADESH DAN MOZENA
BANGLADESH DISASTER RESPONSE EXERCISE AND EXCHANGE,
2013
OPENING CEREMONY
LAKESHORE HOTEL, DHAKA
AUGUST 18, 2013**

Lt. Gen. Abu Belal Muhammad Shafiul Huq, Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division

... and all of you ... Bangladesh military, Bangladesh government civilians, civil society, international participants ... all of you who, like me, believe in preparedness for disasters, especially earthquakes

Asalaam ‘malaikum and good morning

It is not a question of whether or if ...

It is only a question of when ...

... when will Dhaka be hit by a large magnitude earthquake?

Will it be later this morning? Or, perhaps, tomorrow? Maybe next week ... or next year ... or in a decade or two?

We do not know when an earthquake will hit Dhaka, but we do know that Bangladesh is crisscrossed by three major fault lines, that one of them passes relatively close to Dhaka, that given the historical pattern of earthquakes in this region, Dhaka may be about three decades overdue for a major quake.

We know, too, that if Dhaka were hit by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, 20% or more of the 350,000 buildings of this great megacity would collapse, according to a Government of Bangladesh estimate. Of course, the destruction from a bigger earthquake would increase exponentially. Some predict that a 7.5 or 8.0 magnitude quake could bring down as many as 80% of the buildings ... but I don't know whether that is accurate or not.

In a sense, precision in the estimate of destruction does not really matter, since any of these scenarios would be catastrophic beyond comprehension.

In many countries around the world, the reaction to a “catastrophe beyond comprehension” might be some handwringing and then a de facto decision not to think about the unthinkable.

That, of course, is not the response of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is accustomed to thinking about the unthinkable and now is well prepared to deal with massive cyclones, floods and tidal surges. Indeed, Bangladesh is a global model of preparedness on these fronts.

But Bangladesh is not content to rest on these laurels ... no ... rather it has chosen to tackle disaster preparedness on yet another front: earthquake preparedness.

I am pleased that America is Bangladesh’s steadfast partner in helping Bangladesh prepare for an earthquake disaster. This exercise follows two smaller, more focused earthquake preparedness exercises that we, our Bangladeshi partners and many of you held earlier this year. The results of those exercises, especially relating to disaster response management and to debris management, will factor into this current exercise.

Exercises such as this are useful only to the extent that they are realistic.

I sat in on part of one of our earlier earthquake preparedness exercises, and was surprised to hear the participants talking about convening an inter-ministerial meeting at the secretary level to coordinate the response to the earthquake. I could bite my lip no longer. I interjected, reminding participants that in the aftermath of a real-life earthquake, communications would be destroyed with all landlines and cellphones dysfunctional, reminding them that some of the secretaries might be dead or injured or trapped or pre-occupied with saving family members or others, reminding them that there would be no functioning transportation available.

To be meaningful, this exercise must factor these unpleasant eventualities into the scenario. I know that this is less convenient; I know that this makes the exercise so much harder and gut-wrenching to think about, but this is the only way to ask the hard, hard questions that must be asked to come up with the answers that must be found to prepare for an earthquake.

These questions are simple to pose but difficult to answer. I suggest just a few that come first to mind:

- Who are the critical players in orchestrating an effective response to an earthquake? Do they live in housing that would survive a major earthquake? How would these key players communicate with each other if the cellphones and landlines were out of commission? Is there a pre-identified earthquake-proof command and control facility where these key players would attempt to gather to manage the response?
- What are the earthquake survivability prospects of other vital elements of the response structure, for example, hospitals and other health facilities, fire departments, police and other security centers, food and water supplies, etc.? Would these facilities survive an earthquake? If not, could they be retrofitted to meet international seismic standards?

How and where can temporary facilities, such as morgues, field hospitals, tent cities for survivors, etc. be set up? How can debris be managed and transportation routes reopened?

Of course, as you work your way through the exercise, you will raise and then seek to answer many more questions, some more difficult than the ones that I have cited.

I believe that this year's exercise will prove especially beneficial as part of the field exercises will involve a rubble heap that is being built to simulate a collapsed building, so search and rescue teams can train on it for years to come. I believe this rubble heap will provide realistic exercising for both professional rescuers and for trained volunteer rescuers.

The tragedy of Rana Plaza made clear that in a disaster, Bangladeshis want to help their fellow citizens in distress; Bangladeshis are willing to get involved and pitch in to help. This is a beautiful trait of the Bangladeshi spirit. But Rana Plaza made clear that untrained volunteer rescuers put both themselves and the victims at risk. During the Rana Plaza rescue efforts, at least four volunteer rescuers were killed and others injured, including one who is now a quadriplegic. Such added tragedy must be avoided.

The government rightly recognizes that during an earthquake, professional rescuers and the military personnel simply will not have the capacity to respond in a timely fashion to the massive rescue needs, so volunteer rescuers are essential. The key is to identify, train and equip a huge corps of volunteer rescuers, and this is exactly what the government is doing. Such training will help to ensure that these well-meaning volunteers do not themselves become tragic victims and to ensure that the volunteers undertake rescues in a fashion that minimizes risks for further injuring the victims. I think volunteers will find exercising on the rubble heap most instructive.

I believe that this large-scale exercise that we will launch shortly may well prove to be the most important thing that any of us do this year. If you the participants in this intensive four day exercise ask the hard, hard questions and discuss freely, creatively and constructively how best to answer these questions, then I think all of Bangladesh, all of the wonderful people of this great nation, will be safer, better prepared for when the next earthquake hits Bangladesh.

I trust each of you is proud of your contribution to the success of this exercise and to the well-being of the people of Bangladesh.

For the sake of the great people of Bangladesh, I wish you well as you launch into this exercise, which could save countless lives.

Thank you.

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**As prepared for delivery.*